# THE BREVIARY FOR LOVERS

By FELIX TIMMERMANS

*Although Belgium is one of the smallest countries in Europe, she has two languages and two literatures—French and Flemish. Her French literature has always been under the influence of Paris. Her Flemish literature, however, has developed more or less on its own, with little outside influence. Indeed, it is a true folk literature, as sturdy and as full of life as the people of Flanders themselves. Perhaps it is because of this very disregard of all literary "isms" that the modern Flemish writers have become so popular throughout Europe.*

*Felix Timmermans hardly needs any introduction. He is the most outstanding representative of modern Flemish literature, and some of his works, in particular his novel "Pallieter," have been translated into many other languages. He is a master of the short story. His novels and tales, whose scene is almost always the district just southeast of Antwerp along the banks of the little River Nethe, combine a sort of elemental humor with deep religious feeling, a profound love of Nature, and gentle compassion for human weakness.*

*The illustrations in the story are also by the author.—K.M.*

FONS could not find any tobacco for his pipe. He even looked for some in the coat of his son Cornelius. This coat was hanging behind the cellar door. He did not find any tobacco in it but pulled out a letter.

"That'll be from his sweetheart," he said with a smile. He wanted to put it back in the pocket, but he was seized by a pleasant feeling of curiosity, and he began to read. His eyes got smaller and smaller.

Then Cornelius came home with his fishing rod.

"Didn't catch a thing," he growled.

"Look," said Fons, "I happened to come across a letter from your sweetheart! You needn't blush. I only read the first two lines, and I won't read any more, for after all it's none of my business." He pushed the letter back into the coat pocket. "But I can't help laughing when I read that your little Fina is glad about your having written her that your heart will beat for her in all eternity."

"Well, Father," Cornelius said with conviction, "that's how it is!"

"Poor chump! Eternity, eternity . . . eternity is slightly different from what you may imagine. I can tell you a story about that!"

Cornelius looked at him with interest. His father could tell such humorous stories, and he liked telling them.

"Give me a pipe of tobacco, Cornelius, and sit down! I'll explain things to you in a few words. You know, it's my love story."

He filled his pipe, lit it and, pushing his legs from habit towards the stove, began to speak, as if to himself, without looking at Cornelius.

"I suppose I was just about as old as you are now; in those days I was still a printer. One Sunday I was sitting under the bridge at the big lock and fishing. It was rather windy. Suddenly a woman's hat with little red flowers on it fell into the water in front of me. I looked around to see who had sent me this curious gift. It was the wind, and the hat belonged to a girl who wrung her hands and implored me: 'Please, sir, please get it out!'

I fished it out with my rod and gave it back to

the young lady. First I shook the water out of the hat and tore off one of the red flowers which was all hanging down. 'I'll keep that as a remembrance,' I laughed, and put the flower in my buttonhole. She looked at me with her shining eyes, as lovely as dark flowers. She murmered a word of thanks, but her eyes were so beautiful that I heard nothing of what she said. Afterwards, when I sat fishing again, I kept on seeing these eyes before me. At night I dreamed of them, and I was suddenly a changed man. I felt happy, not because of those eyes alone, of course, but because they were *her* eyes. In short, I had fallen in love. Of course, I had seen her before too, I knew she was called Emma Vermees and that she worked as a seamstress in some linen shop or other; but I had never noticed her. As you see, it is sometimes enough if someone looks deep into our eyes for all the screws of our heart and soul to be loosened.

After that I found no peace, I had to see her and lose myself in her eyes. When she came home from work in the evening, I waited for her on the road. I tried as hard as I could to make her notice me, I nodded, I took off my hat, and I tried to let my heart speak through my eyes. She acknowledged my greeting with a smile and blushed a little. The second time I met her she did the same, but at the corner she looked back. Ah, this looking back at the corner, this sign of the beginnings of sympathy, made me jump with joy, and I almost had to close my mouth with my hand in order not to shout out loud there on the street.

I decided to speak to her the following day and to tell her of my overflowing heart. I had even sniffed around in an old book, so as to find out what words were needed to win the heart of a woman. They were beautiful words which I had learnt by heart and which I now carried around carefully in me, like eggs in a handkerchief. But what bunglers we men are! And what an idealist that poet was! Life is quite different. When I met Emma, the words of the poet would not come out of my throat, and the only reply I had for her lovely smile was the question: 'Isn't your hat entirely ruined now?'

'Oh no,' she laughed in embarrassment, 'I let it get dry, and then I put some new flowers on it, for the old ones had all shrunk.'

'Yes, I just wanted to catch a pike,' I said, because I couldn't think of anything else.

'Yes, you were just fishing,' she replied, and looked down.

I plucked up all my courage and lied: 'Sometimes I catch pikes like this!' I indicated about three feet. 'Really?' she asked.

'I'll catch one for you,' I promised. She thanked me, I raised my hat, and each continued on his way.

For a whole week I was in agony, till I had caught a pike, and it was scarcely as big as a baby's spoon. I had sworn to myself: I won't try to see Emma again until she has got her pike. In the end I bought one from old Gustave Sanders, who could fish like Saint Peter himself. My youngest brother took the pike to her house.

On the following day I dared to wait for her again. 'Well, Miss Vermees, how did you like it?'

'Oh, it was very nice, but it had so many bones,' and as she said it she went as red as a lobster.

'Then I'll catch you a fine eel.'

'Oh no,' she begged, 'for. . . no,' she couldn't go on and quickly turned away.

'An eel,' I called, 'I'll send you an eel!'

So I concentrated entirely on catching eels, but it soon seemed as if the Water Devil had it in for me, for all I caught was thin little things, hardly as thick as a pipe stem, till one day I went to Baelen on the Nethe, three hours from here, where at last I caught a couple of nice eels. Our Gustave took them to Emma. But her father, who was in the church choir, kicked Gustave in the pants and called after him that he didn't want any eels as a present from anybody, that he could buy some himself if he felt like it. But the old scoundrel kept the eels all right.

That evening I got a letter from Emma, in which she apologized for her father's rude behavior and asked me not to send any more fish, because her father was very angry with me for it.

The next day I waited for her early in the morning and asked her whether we couldn't meet one evening. She immediately agreed with pleasure.

That evening we walked up and down behind the church, and since it was dark and I could only guess at her lovely eyes I managed to produce the words of the poet. I think I found even more beautiful words, so beautiful that there were tears on her cheeks, and since I couldn't bear to see tears I kissed them away.

After that we met secretly, for she was afraid of her father. Then I also began to write her letters, just as you do now, letters which simply swarmed with eternal love, stars, suns, and all those glorious things which a man never thinks of otherwise. Our Gustave had to deliver the letters secretly to her, but he always demanded a good tip because, after all, he felt he always ran the risk of getting another kick in the pants.

Ah, Cornelius, how happy I was in those days! When your mother was young, she was a lovely, charming girl, so fresh and nimble that it was a pleasure just to look at her. But her father was a difficult fellow and, because my father was the drummer in the 'Saint Cecilia' band—he himself played the trumpet in the 'Orpheus' band, and the two bands couldn't stand each other—he was against our loving each other. But we did not let that worry us and went on secretly writing letters, twice a week. They were wonderful, those letters we wrote to each other. But when I noticed that she copied her letters from the same book, the 'Breviary for Lovers,' from which I took my inspiration, I was first of all ashamed of myself, secondly I was afraid that I might be found out, and how ridiculous I would then be in her eyes, and thirdly I had a suspicion that perhaps she was not quite sincere. Of course I did not dare to say or write anything about it, for fear that she might also accuse me of insincerity. I looked in vain for another source for my love letters. From then on I wrote my letters on my own. But now they weren't so long any more, not so highflown, not so beautiful, so impassioned, so uplifting. She soon accused me of having become much cooler and more matter-of-fact towards her. I did not dare to tell her the reason. Her letters were still as beautiful as ever. But in the end I found it boring that she copied everything word for word from the 'Breviary for Lovers.' I always knew what her letters would be in advance. Why didn't she do as I did?

The difficulties with her father grew from day to day. We no longer found any opportunity to see each other.

Now it would have been a consolation to her if she had received beautiful letters. But I simply could no longer force myself to copy letters from anywhere. One fine summer's day I received, through the hands of her friend—the daughter of the confectioner who lived across the street from us—a short letter from Emma which this time she had not copied from the 'Breviary for Lovers.' She informed me that everything must be over between us now, because life was becoming too difficult for her at home and also because my affection had not remained the same as before, which was clear-

ly proved by my short, matter-of-fact letters.

'But I shall love you in all eternity,' she added. At the same time she returned all my letters to me. In my heart I could not spare her the reproach of insincerity, since she had jilted me for such a trifle. I was really angry with her and sent her back her letters too. That was the end of our love story. You see, now the 'eternal love' had collapsed like a rotten roof!

Although I did not forget her, I did not weep for her. I only felt sorry that our love had to end like that. But what a shock it was when Lisa, the confectioner's daughter, told me a year later that Emma was going to marry Nuyl the painter! And that's what she did.

I felt humiliated. The affection which I had still felt for her turned into resentment. I did not want to appear humiliated and said: 'Very well, then I'll get married too!' At first I wanted to go fishing again till another hat should fall into the water. But then, didn't her fair-haired friend Lisa, who was always so nice to me, live over there in the confectioner's shop? I began to buy cough drops at her place. She agreed with me that it was not nice of Emma to forget me so soon. And since I often went to get cough drops, we got to know each other better from day to day.

Gradually I felt a growing affection for Lisa. She for me too. This was apparent from many things, but the decisive word did not come until her mother cut through the knot one day. We had been standing the whole evening at the door together, and Lisa's mother said to us with a laugh: 'Look here, if you have things to tell each other you needn't do it at the door like common people! There's room enough inside!'

That settled the matter. I was really fond of Lisa, and her parents were of the opinion that we should get married soon. As she was the only child, she would get the business. I could give up my printing and help serve the customers in the shop and supervise the two assistants in the bakery. Her father wanted to retire, and her mother liked the idea too.

Although we saw each other every day, Lisa would still have liked me to write her love letters. She wanted to write me some too then. She felt that there must be love letters as enduring witnesses and that for the future, when one of us had died, they would be a beautiful souvenir. I scratched my head and thought: Is it going to begin all over again and make life difficult for me? By a lucky chance I found a volume of poems by a certain Jan van Beers. With small alterations, I copied this and that from it. To my horror she took her letters from the accursed 'Breviary for Lovers.' And since she had praised my verses I was bound, whether I liked it or not, to tell her how sweet and charming I thought her letters were. In this way we praised each other till we were married. As you know, we had three children.

Emma, whom I had forgotten completely by now and of whom I had lost sight, had two children who bought chocolate drops and boiled sweets at our shop. She had not been lucky in her marriage. Her husband was a real drunkard and lazybones, and by degrees they became so badly off that Emma was forced to earn a little extra money by sewing in other people's houses. My wife could not cope with the sewing and mending for the children because she had to be so much in the shop. Well, as things happen, my wife had always remained Emma's friend and so Emma came to us to mend our clothes. Every fortnight she came for a day.

Oh, how that woman had changed! She had got thin and gray, all withered, and looked older than she actually was. One really couldn't help pitying her. I often thought: Does it seem possible that this

woman once conquered my heart with her hat and her eyes? One could hardly believe it. We never touched on these things by so much as a word.

The years passed. Her husband died of his laziness, and Emma got older-looking every day. For us, too, difficult times were to come. My wife fell ill, and now it was Emma who nursed her and looked after the household and the children. She came every day and also helped in the shop. My wife got worse and worse, and after she had had to bear terrible pain for two years, God called her unto Himself. But before she died she said: 'Fons, do keep Emma with you, she is so good to the children.'

Emma stayed. She came every day and did her work. By now she had many wrinkles and looked altogether like a Madonna of the Seven Pains. I now sought consolation in fishing, something I had given up years before. To sit alone like that by the water, in the quietness of Nature, that's what I like, there one gets as quiet as Nature herself.

A year went by. Then one day I brought home a pike, a big pike, perhaps the biggest I have ever caught. I baked it, for it's not everybody who can do that like me. The children were pleased when it came on the table. I handed Emma the dish. 'No,' she said, 'I would rather have some bread and butter with Dutch cheese.'

And involuntarily, without thinking, I said: 'Oh yes, you are afraid of the bones. Next time I'll bring you an eel. . . .'

I was startled at my own words. I couldn't go on; suddenly I felt giddy, and the old memory stood before me like a fragrant rose. Emma looked at me in surprise and blushed. Reproach, longing, tenderness, and Heaven knows what spoke from her eyes. Perplexed, I stood there, holding the dish with the pike. And, believe it or not, they were the same eyes, her eyes in all their old beauty. She was old, wrinkled, and thin, but her eyes, her eyes! Once again I saw in them youth, longing, and love, just as before. My whole body trembled, I was shaken through and through.

Then, fortunately, the bell rang in the shop. She got up quickly, one could see that she was glad to be released from this uncomfortable situation. Afterwards, not a word was said about it, but in me the whole past had come alive again. I found no peace, I couldn't sleep any more I told myself that I was crazy, but it didn't get better.

I did not let it show, but our former ease of manner was gone. A heavy load weighed on my heart. I noticed a change in her too She had become quieter, shy and timid. We avoided one another. If by chance we happened to be alone together, she quickly spoke of all kinds of well-known bits of news, as if she didn't want to give me time to say the word 'pike.' At table with the children, and behind the shop counter, when customers were there, we often looked at each other too long, and neither of us said a word. A certain embarrassment had arisen, something that was struggling for release.

No, it couldn't go on like that. I no longer knew what to do—you can imagine what it was like—till I gathered all my courage and went off without saying a word. I went straight to the grave of my wife. To her who was lying there, I spoke: 'If you don't like it, let me have a sign, no matter what kind.' Then I went off, all day, far into the fields.

No sign came, and towards evening I began to be afraid that a sign might still come after all. On the way home I prayed to God and all the saints that no sign might come. Emma had already gone home, and on the following day she did not ask me where I had been.

Then it happened, just after two o'clock in the afternoon. At this time the children are at school, and it is seldom that anyone comes into the shop. I locked the front door. She looked at me with surprise and in frightened anticipation.

My wife had given no sign, and so I had courage and was in a hurry too. After a short pause, for I could not find a proper beginning and my throat felt dried up, I said in a hoarse voice: 'Emma, I should like to have a word with you.' She suddenly began to cry. Ah, Mother of God! How beautiful she seemed again! What did it matter that she was thin, old, and wrinkled—all that was only a varnish that covered the young Emma! I saw through this varnish. Only her eyes had kept their former brilliance and mirrored the spring in her heart. I took her hand. 'Come,' I said, deeply moved, 'you are crying, and you don't even know why.'

She did not draw away her hand and kept on sobbing. I kissed her hand, and she did not resist.

'Dear child,' I said, 'our Lord has willed it so.'

Then she spoke, smiling through her tears: 'It all happened because of the letters. . . .'

'Please, let's not say another word about those letters,' I implored her. I put my arms around her. She put hers around me.

'I'm so crazy about beautiful love letters,' she whispered.

'We shan't have time for that,' I said quickly, 'tomorrow we'll go to the preacher.'

One month later we got married, and you, Cornelius, are the child of this marriage . . . so that I now had three kinds of children, for of course she brought along hers. We were very happy, Cornelius. But your mother, who has now been in her grave for years, never really knew what the business of the love letters was all about. And it's just as well. . . ."

Fons stared pensively before him, his cold pipe in his hand.

"Eternal love," he observed, with a sad smile. "And you, Cornelius," he suddenly asked, "where do you get your highfalutin words? Out of your own noodle or also from. . . ."

"Yes, Father," Cornelius said and went crimson.